

Heteropatriarchal Semantics and Lesbian Identity: The Ways a Lesbian Can Be

Introduction

Of the "issues" that have disturbed and disrupted Lesbian communities during the past two decades, one, in particular, has the potential to destroy our efforts to mobilize Lesbians, to create a Lesbian *movement* grounded in a Lesbian stance: femininity. The repeated rationales offered for embracing femininity have generated anger and hostilities because they strike at the heart of what it means *to be* a Lesbian in a heteropatriarchy: one who *resists efforts to make her into "a woman"*; one who *defies the male descriptions and prescriptions that would limit her possibilities*; one who *refuses the very foundations of heteropatriarchal reality*. Our identity as Lesbians is at stake.

Whatever one chooses to call them, "lipstick Lesbians," "dykes for spikes," or "femmes,"¹ they have appeared in our communities and our movement in a variety of guises, demanding our support and approval for their appearance and behavior, asserting their "right" to wear make-up, high heels, and garter belts, to allow men to fuck them, and to exploit, use, and abuse Lesbians at will. When Lesbians like me object to their assertions, they insult us, belittle our lives, and call us their "oppressors." In short, their agenda is to destroy the Lesbian political movement by alternately playing the "victim" and then bullying, by lying, by coquetry, by manipulation, and by just plain stupidity.

I don't understand why some Lesbians feel so righteous, so sure of themselves, when they extol the virtues of Lesbian "femininity" and attack Lesbian "masculinity." I have trouble listening to Lesbians who use either word as though it were *meaningful* in a Lesbian context, because both *femininity* and *masculinity* are heteropatriarchal (HP) terms that establish the boundaries of what is "acceptable," "permissible" appearance and behavior for females, Lesbians included. Heteropatriarchal semantics (HS) equates femininity with femaleness and masculinity with maleness, as though behaviors and personality traits were determined by biological sex. On the basis of that equation, HP values femininity in females and masculinity in males. Only feminine females are considered "good" in HP, yet what is described as "masculinity" is held up to us as the ideal of what it means to be

"human." As a result of these descriptions, the female who embraces the femininity forced on her by HP is trapped in a semantic double-bind. The woman who learns the behaviors and modes of thought attributed to femininity and becomes feminine is, by definition, less than "human." "Masculinity," in contrast, not only establishes the cultural boundaries for men, it taboos those behaviors and aspirations for females. Thus, femininity is made to seem attractive because females who act "like a man" are deviant, and, therefore, "bad"; women willingly acquire the appurtenances of femininity even though it inherently relegates them to second-class status because it's the only "positive" option available in HP terms. Within this framework, it's apparently better to be rewarded for accepting one's devaluation than to be devalued for defying the limitations imposed by male hegemony.

Sadly, Lesbians who challenge those who embrace and extol femininity are attacked as "oppressors," ridiculed for "aping men," and labeled "fascists" and "neo-Nazis." Lesbians who accept the HP dichotomy as meaningful remain trapped within the either/or thinking some of us are trying to unlearn. Lesbians committed to personal and social change not only want to rid ourselves of the HS dichotomy and the HP misogyny that values femininity, we want to learn how to think beyond the limitations imposed by words like *feminine* and *masculine* and imagine what it would be like to be *neither*.

In order to start this process, we have to start by asking: What does it mean to be a Lesbian in a Lesbian context? Our discussion can begin, I think, by identifying how Lesbians *differ* from heterosexuals, bisexuals, and gaymen, and acknowledging that our oppression is based on those differences. Just as blacks begin to establish their identity as distinct from their white oppressors, as native Americans resist the identities imposed on them by the white men who've destroyed their cultures, so Lesbians must make our difference the focus of our identity and resist those who wish to validate an identity constructed for us by men. We need to identify the features that make us uniquely Lesbian; it is, after all, the reason we're outcasts. We cannot ignore the heteropatriarchy or its values anymore than we can pretend that we weren't born into, raised, and live in HP, and the fact that many of our ideas and assumptions are heteropatriarchal in origin. But we can certainly start unlearning those values and assumptions, and the first step is rejecting femininity and the idea that it's a "good thing" for us.

Today, Lesbians remain divided by HP dichotomies, bouncing back and forth between the "feminine" and "masculine" poles, because we still accept as valid men's descriptions of "what is." A majority of Lesbians haven't even begun to imagine who we might be or to look for options outside of HP boundaries; they are still preoccupied with devising ways of surviving more (and less) comfortably within the HP context, which requires accepting as real the world described by HP terms.

The argument isn't about whether to be "feminine" or "masculine." It's about what being a Lesbian *means*. What is Lesbian identity? What does it mean to be a

Lesbian, live as a Lesbian, *think* as a Lesbian, *in a Lesbian context*? So we have to begin by identifying how we differ from heterosexual women and bisexuals and make our deviance the core of our identity. *Lesbians don't fuck men.* We are the only group in the world that refuses to place men at the center of our lives. We are the only group whose lives are focused on women.

But we are also not a homogeneous group. In our efforts to establish the basis of Lesbian identity, we are constantly engaged in confronting how the life histories we bring with us into Lesbian communities complicate and confuse our interactions. Because we each have different experiences and backgrounds,² we have to be willing to name and acknowledge the HP assumptions and values we bring with us into a Lesbian context. We must do this before we can rid ourselves of the HP elements that divide us from one another. We have to acknowledge the HP attitudes we still possess before we can unlearn them. And we *can* accomplish both. White Lesbians unlearning racism is a good example of this process; unlearning ageist attitudes is another.

I, for one, don't believe that femininity can be positively valued in a Lesbian context, and I will explain why rejecting femininity is an essentially Lesbian act.

Identifying the Problem

Lesbians are divided from each other by the descriptions of "the world" we accept as valid and accurate; we do not begin our Lesbian lives or enter our Lesbian communities untainted by HP ways of thinking and acting. Many of our political differences can be traced to how thoroughly we believe the version of reality men have presented to us. Some Lesbians believe that the HP description of reality is essentially accurate, while others believe that it's utterly false. Some Lesbians accept portions of HP reality that other Lesbians have rejected. Our commitment to the assumptions of HP is reflected in the ways we use English.

Our experience with acquiring a first language deceives us into believing that there is a single reality, the one encoded and described to us by that language. Many U. S. Lesbians learned English as our first language and, with it, the U. S. version of reality. English, like any language, describes the version of reality preferred by the majority of speakers in a society, and forces us to accept the reality agreed upon by those speakers. The United States is a heteropatriarchal society, a culture that assumes that heterosexuality is "natural," that male dominance is "natural," and that female subordination is "natural"; English provides its speakers with ways of expressing these assumptions as though they were incontrovertible facts. The words *masculine* and *feminine* exist only because they express concepts essential to the maintenance of HP reality. But the existence and continual use of these words doesn't mean that they denote "real" or actual things.

The English language is a grid, a conceptual frame, that a society imposes on the experience and perceptions of its speakers. There are ways of getting around

that grid, ways of expressing values and perceptions not validated by the culture, but that takes work and thought that most people are unwilling to invest in talking and writing. As long as a Lesbian uses words sanctioned, supported, and accepted by HP culture, she risks being understood and interpreted within the limits of the reality described by English. To imagine that we can use English and totally avoid its HP assumptions is a delusion that's especially dangerous for Lesbians.

Lesbian speakers have a "semantic problem," but it isn't one of our own creation. It was imposed on us when we learned to think and talk in English. (I don't think dialect makes a difference here.) Some Lesbians may resist my assertion that our problem is semantic, because dysfunctional communication in heteropatriarchy is swept under the rug with statements like "It's just a semantic problem," "It's only a question of semantics," or "Don't play semantic games with me," as though semantics were irrelevant, or an excuse to muddy the waters that someone else thinks are "clear." I want to say that semantics is important, and we need to pay much closer attention to semantics than we do. We cannot adopt as workable the HP assertion that semantics is trivial, and we cannot continue to ignore the ways that semantics causes miscommunication among us.

Our semantic problems often stem from the divergent versions of reality we accept, and we get into trouble when we assume that our use of the same words means we're talking about the same things. A good example of semantic confusion occurred in *Lesbian Ethics* during 1985-'86 (the Fall, 1985 issue, in which Linda Strega's "The Big Sell-Out: Lesbian Femininity" appeared, and the Spring, 1986 issue, in which Paula Mariedaughter and Mary Crane responded to Strega's analysis.³ In her article, Strega used the terms *butch* and *femme* to refer to differences among Lesbians because the labels are part of Lesbian tradition and so already have meaning for her Lesbian audience. Strega used the word *butch* differently than it has been and continues to be used among some Lesbians, investing it with political substance and, in the process, appearing to conflate the reference of *butch* and *Lesbian*. But *butch* and *femme* carry with them a lot of semantic baggage from our Lesbian herstory. What the terms have meant in the past, and the way Lesbians like Mariedaughter and Crane use them, wasn't the way Strega wanted to use them. Their use of the same words made it seem as though they were talking about the same aspects of Lesbian living, but they weren't. One of Strega's most important points was her observation that Lesbians in general value feminine Lesbians much more than they value masculine Lesbians. The Lesbian community generally discredits, even shuns, (life-long) masculine Lesbians because we fit the twentieth-century stereotype (promulgated by the nineteenth-century sexologists) of "the real Lesbian," while, in contrast, it listens to, even lionizes, feminine Lesbians, because they fit the HP stereotype of "the womanly woman."⁴

That valuing femininity more than what is perceived as masculinity among us reflects an especially nasty form of Lesbian-hating is, I think, beyond question. Why conformity to a male ideal would give feminine Lesbians more credibility

among us continues to puzzle me. In order to understand our confusion and move toward a resolution of it, I think we need to begin with its sources in the heteropatriarchal semantics (HS) of English.

Heteropatriarchal Semantics

Why do Lesbians follow heterosexuals in valuing feminine women and devaluing "mannish" women? The answer lies in the semantics of English. Diagram 1 presents the basic semantic dichotomy of HP and its internal logic. It represents an important piece of the HP semantic system called "consensus reality." "Consensus reality" refers to that version of reality which most people accept as true and act upon as though it were true. The diagram is a way of visualizing how this portion of semantic "space" is stored in our long-term memory, a picture of the grid that heteropatriarchal teaching has imposed on our experiences. (I've substituted words at each level for semantic features.)

LEVEL	CATEGORY	FEATURE	
		+ MALE	- MALE
I	BIOLOGICAL	Male	Female
II	FUNCTIONAL (Breeders)	Man Father	Woman Mother
III	BEHAVIORAL	Real Man Masculine Manly	Real Woman Feminine Womanly
		Womanish	Mannish

Diagram 1. Heteropatriarchal Semantics

The semantic grid of Diagram 1 represents the HP version of what "being human" means. The essential dichotomy that gives this grid its meaning is based on the much-touted sexual dimorphism of "our" species. That is, *homo sapiens* (sic!) is described as having two sexes which differ from each other in primary and secondary sexual characteristics. But this is only a partial description of the world we comprehend through our senses. For example, the existence of hermaphrodites exposes the inadequacy of the grid as a description of the world, while the word *hermaphrodite*, a compound (*hermes* [+MALE] and *aphrodite* [-MALE]) based on the dichotomy, isn't much more than a clumsy attempt to preserve the HP semantic structure in spite of contradicting evidence. What we have here is a

description of reality that isn't accurate, one that tries to account for aspects of reality not covered by its dichotomy by simply repeating the dichotomy itself.

Sexual dimorphism is the foundation of HP semantics, politics, and personality. Personality, according to HP, is based on biological sex. Biology determines behavior, mannerisms, appearance, emotional style, and how one thinks. This is a monocausal ideology. Sexual dimorphism is the reproductive strategy for numerous species, but it's neither necessary nor inevitable, nor is it biologically superior to other reproductive methods (as is commonly believed). Many species in addition to our own are now known to reproduce parthenogenetically (for example, lizards, fish, seagulls, and some plants). Only humans seem to be obsessed with their reproductive capacity, as though they'd invented and perfected it. Contrary to popular thinking, it's not at all obvious that biological sex or reproductive potential should be the basis of personality. One might just as well posit height, weight, or the position of constellations with respect to the earth at the time of one's birth, as astrology does, as the source of personality. (Conventional astrology incorporates sexual dimorphism in its descriptions of personality types.)

Heterosexuality doesn't appear overtly in Diagram 1 because it's integral to the HP description of the world. The logic of HP assumes that heterosexuality *necessarily* follows from sexual dimorphism, expressed as "The Stick-in-the-Hole Theory of Behavior" or, "Function Follows Form":

- 1) Men have pricks, women have vaginas;
- 2) Pricks can be stuck into vaginas;

ERGO: Vaginas exist *because* pricks exist.

The possession of genitalia of a specific kind is believed to necessitate its usage in a specific way. The assumption that function follows form and is, therefore, "natural," is deeply ingrained. It isn't surprising that Lesbians as well as heterosexuals believe this. That which is assumed, primary, and implicit is difficult to challenge. Heterosexuality is hard for Lesbians to question because our outcast status depends on it; in a binary view of the world, we are its antithesis.

The ideas of heterosexuality and its "naturalness" cannot be questioned in HP: they aren't "open to question," like yours or mine, and aren't supposed to be challenged. If you doubt this, put a bumpersticker on your car (or bike or skateboard) that says, "If Abortion is a Crime, Fucking Should be a Felony." A female's right to terminate a pregnancy is open to question; the "necessity" of heterosexual coitus (fucking) isn't. Other cultures deal with sexual dimorphism differently, and this is reflected in their languages. I am concerned here *only* with the culture imposed in the continental United States. Some Lesbians, in an effort to deny the privileges they get for being feminine, get into "cultural relativity," and how this or that behavior or mode of dress differs from one culture to another (as in

Lesbian Connection 9, 1 [July/August 1986], p. 17). I'm not talking about saris or mu-mus or the kilts worn by men of the Scottish clans, but about what skirts, dresses, high heels, and make-up mean in the U. S., in the twentieth century.

Sexual dimorphism underlies HP semantics, along with its corollary assumption, heterosexuality. Dividing a species into male and female is only the first step. If one accepts the idea that biological sex is a significant feature, one might suppose that that distinction would result in semantic features like +MALE and +FEMALE. But this isn't the case in English. Instead, sexual dimorphism is coded as +MALE and -MALE. That females are -MALE in the semantic structure of English might not be immediately apparent to my readers, so I'll explain.

In English, the male sex is posited as the norm, the standard; the female sex is that which is non-male ("other"). The set of terms for occupations is a familiar example of how maleness is assumed unless the label is explicitly modified by a female term. Persons addressed as *doctor, lawyer, artist, author, engineer, surgeon, sculptor, mayor, jockey*, and so on, are assumed to be male unless a special form of the label is used, e.g., *woman doctor, lady lawyer, authoress, or sculptress*. This is true of all prestige occupations. In contrast, the occupational labels assumed to be inherently female, which require overt modification if the person is male, refer to low prestige, low pay occupations: *secretary, prostitute, nurse*. When a male holds one of these occupations, he is called a *male secretary, male prostitute, or male nurse*. Assuming that the male sex is normal and the female sex deviant also underlies the use of pseudo-generic *man*, men being "the measure of all things," and the pronoun *he* as though it encompassed females in its reference. In English, all "persons" are assumed to be male unless otherwise specified. (Lesbians are erased when we allow ourselves to be subsumed under male terms, e.g., *homosexual* and *gay*.)

The leftmost, vertical portion of Diagram 1 divides HP semantic "space" into three discrete levels: BIOLOGICAL, FUNCTIONAL, and BEHAVIORAL. I chose this particular order because the internal logic of HS posits an entailment relation between each level: Given that one is (usually) born either MALE or FEMALE (*female*, from the French *femelle*, was re-etymologized in the fourteenth century to make it look as though it were derived from *male*), it follows from this biological trait that one is either MAN or WOMAN in FUNCTION (FATHER or MOTHER), and from this functional description, it follows that one's BEHAVIOR will necessarily be culturally appropriate to one's FUNCTION and BIOLOGY—*masculine* or *feminine*—in HP terms. If one is born female, then one is also necessarily a woman and, being a woman in this HP culture, one is also *necessarily* "feminine" and "womanly." This entailment relation makes the two words synonymous in English, as when "being feminine" is used as though it means 'being a woman'. The meaning of being born female in the U. S. is being *feminine*. A female who is nonfeminine is an unacceptable contradiction in HP terms.

Most heterosexuals, and Lesbians as well, accept as "fact" the description of

reality presented by English semantics. They assume that the descriptive limits of English are, in fact, the limits of reality. One is or is not a man; men are the standard of comparison. This assumption was expressed in a television advertisement for a magazine aimed at a female audience, *Savvy*: "You don't have to be *like a man* to succeed in business. You can allow yourself to be *a woman*." It's also the reason some Lesbians are repeatedly addressed as "sir" by heterosexuals. When we present ourselves at restaurants, gas stations, post offices, and other public places, whoever is dealing with us scans us for what they consider "relevant features": size, weight, height, voice, body posture, clothing, and length of hair. This information gives them a composite sex analysis, and, since they have only two categories, +MALE and -MALE, Lesbians who fit the +MALE composite are going to be addressed as "sir." They don't perceive us as *Lesbian*. They're matching bodies against conceptual maps. A rock and roll song of the 1960s expressed this operating assumption: "Just two kinds of people in the world." Likewise, Lesbians who describe another Lesbian as "like a man," "masculine," or "mannish" validate HP reality, and prioritize HP values by negating other Lesbians.

At the BEHAVIORAL Level (III), I've placed the most commonly used adjectives that describe the behaviors attributed to each sex. The significance of the +MALE/-MALE dichotomy and the rigidity with which HP must maintain it is explicit in Diagram 1 in two ways. First, I've included both "real man" and "real woman," which presuppose "unreal" men and women, i.e., "queers," as possibilities. This is one of the ways we're semantically viable, as a presupposition that reinforces heterosexual superiority. In usage, both expressions assume the accuracy of the logical entailments among Levels I, II, and III. If one is female, then one must be a heterosexual and a breeder, and behave in appropriate, "feminine" ways. If she doesn't, if she fails to symbolically enact (and validate) the logical entailments of Level II or III in some way, she isn't a "real woman." She's "something else" because she contradicts the logic of the HP semantic system. What she is is a Lesbian who defied every effort to turn her into a fembot! Some would call this Lesbian a "butch," erroneously, I believe (although many Lesbians who did resist feminization have called ourselves "butches" in the past).

Second, the importance attached to these semantic features is exposed by the final pair of terms, *womanish/mannish*. The usage of both words signals a feature negation (or "violation") within the system. A man who is described as "womanish" is behaving in some way thought to be "like a woman." He may cry when he's angry, frustrated, confused, or grieving; he may cross his legs at the knee; he may bend from the waist to pick something up off the ground. Whatever it is, he is behaving "inappropriately" according to HS. Likewise, a woman described as "mannish" has negated the feature dichotomy by "crossing the line." She may be aggressive, stoic, or withdrawn; she may wear her hair "too" short; she may be "too" tall, or weigh "too much"; she may take large steps instead of small ones. Whatever the specific behavior interpreted as a negation of her category, the

attribute of "mannish" is intended by the user to be both an insult and a warning: Don't go "too far" or you're "out." Semantic violation becomes semantic exclusion; semantic exclusion becomes social ostracism.

HP semantic space is so well maintained that the attempts of some Feminists in the past decade to introduce "androgyny" (or "gynandry") were bound to fail. First, both terms validate the psychological dichotomy MASCULINE/FEMININE they're intended to replace. If two distinct kinds of behavior didn't exist, one reserved for the male, the other for the female, then there would be nothing to combine. Without the pre-existing distinction, no fusion would be necessary or possible. Second, gynandry (or androgyny), as proposed by such Feminists, was operational only at Level III, the Behavioral. They were talking only about personality traits, habits of behavior, as described by HS. Their substitution did not disturb or challenge the entailment conditions between the levels, and it certainly left the foundation, sexual dimorphism, untouched. Finally, trying to promote change "within the system" would work only if they started at Level I, and infiltrated Level III by establishing entailment conditions between the levels. But this strategy, too, is blocked by the adjective pair, *womanish/mannish*. The derogation of those terms interrupts attempts to blur the distinction carried by *masculine/feminine*.

In "Lesbian Separatism: The Linguistic and Social Sources of Separatist Politics" (1978), I listed definitions from the first edition of the *Random House Dictionary* (1967)⁵ of the words *womanly*, *mannish*, and *manly*, *feminine* and *masculine*, then described and analyzed how the very existence of such terms could only be explained by the cultural values they denote and perpetuate. (Words become obsolete only when the speakers of a language no longer want to talk about the ideas or objects the words describe.) I'll repeat myself here, ask you to read the following definitions, and then tell me femininity is something Lesbians should try to "reclaim." I hope that reading these dictionary definitions and my analysis of their cultural significance will prompt other Lesbians to realize that we cannot, like Humpty Dumpty, continue to believe that words mean what we want them to mean.⁶ Words exist and are created because they reflect and inscribe the values and attitudes central to a culture. When they cease to be useful, they become obsolete. Every time a Lesbian uses a word that carries HP assumptions, she is prolonging its existence. As one could predict, the "real meaning" of each word is revealed in the definition of its opposite.

womanly — like or befitting a woman; feminine; not masculine or girlish. *Womanly* implies resemblance in appropriate, fitting ways; *womanly decorum*, *modesty*.

manly — having the qualities usually considered desirable in a man; strong, brave; honorable; resolute; virile. *Manly* implies possession of the most valuable or desirable qualities a man can have, as dignity, honesty, directness,

etc., in opposition to servility, insincerity, underhandedness, etc. It also connotes strength, courage, and fortitude;...

feminine — pertaining to a woman or girl: *feminine beauty, feminine dress*. Like a woman; weak; gentle.

masculine — having the qualities or characteristics of a man; manly; virile; strong; bold; a deep, *masculine voice*. Pertaining to or characteristic of a man or men: *masculine attire*.

mannish — applies to that which resembles man: . . . Applied to a woman, the term is derogatory, suggesting the **aberrant possession of masculine characteristics**. (My emphasis)

You'll notice that the qualities listed under *manly* and *masculine* are the "good" things an individual might wish to be: strong, brave, determined, honest, dignified, etc. Notice that not a single one of many negative qualities commonly attributed to maleness is listed here. What happened to qualities like aggressive, violent, narrow-minded, self-centered, defensive, easily threatened, domineering, penis-obsessed, intrusive, predatory, immature, dependent, energy-sucking, or territorial, egotistical, and war-mongering? In which dictionary, do you suppose, one might find *those* qualities of masculinity listed?

In contrast, the adjectives *womanly* and *feminine* are not really defined. Please read them. Don't assume that you know what you're going to find there. Look closely at the long list of characteristics in the definition for *manly* compared to the circularity of the pseudo-definition for *womanly*: "like or befitting a woman." That's *not* a definition. The real definition for *womanly* is implied as "oppositions" to "manly qualities": "servility, insincerity, underhandedness, etc." Under *feminine*, we pick up two more adjectives, *weak* and *gentle*, and that's it. Positive attributes commonly associated with females, such as nurturing, kind, and loving, have been omitted. Those adjectives didn't make it into the dictionary. It should go without saying that, as a theory of personality, sexual dimorphism and the adjectives that express its assumptions ignore the fact that anyone can be strong *and* gentle. These traits, and others, aren't "opposites" and, therefore, mutually exclusive; it's only our acceptance of the HP description of reality that makes them seem so.

Lesbians shouldn't need to defend "femininity" or feel as though being gentle, kind, tender, interested in fabric and texture, or a host of other personality traits has anything to do with being a female or a "femme." We can be any and all of these things without subscribing to the HS dichotomy. Similarly, Lesbians can enjoy bicycling, playing softball, repairing cars, riding motorcycles, working in construction, and being hostile to men without calling themselves "masculine" or "butch." Accepting those labels to describe our predilections is a trap, and it perpetuates HP ideology as though it belonged in a Lesbian context.

The clencher comes when we consider the definition for *mannish*, "the aberrant possession of masculine characteristics," as though a female who is

honest, strong, dignified, forthright, and brave were a *freak*. Men have reserved the positive attributes for themselves; women are “appropriately” weak, gentle, insincere, servile, and underhanded. Any woman who is honest, forthright, dignified, brave, or resolute is “aberrant,” i.e., *mannish*. HS logic dictates that those born female who reject the HS dichotomy, who refuse to behave in feminine, “appropriate” ways, are labeled “masculine” by semantic default. Those who aren’t visibly -MALE must be +MALE. This semantic trick makes it seem as though HS has described behavior accurately, but all it does is maintain HP consensus reality at the cost of Lesbian integrity. It’s way past time for Lesbians to stop using HP words as though they were meaningful. Any Lesbian who defends femininity and compares another Lesbian to a man by labeling her “masculine” subscribes to HP “consensus reality.”

The Ways a Lesbian Can Be

The purpose of semantic structure is to *create meaning*. Without a semantic structure, meaning does not exist. Lesbians aren’t “meaningful” in HS, so we have to construct a semantic system in which we become meaningful. In the U. S., we turned to the only semantic system we knew as a model, Heteropatriarchal Semantics. Even in the 1950s gay community that I came out into, there was a tacit recognition that Lesbians didn’t divide up neatly into “butch” and “femme.” We had to make it up as we went along, and, although the resulting continuum of terms used the HS dichotomy to define its extremes, still a range of behaviors was acknowledged and labeled. Diagram 2 represents this behavioral continuum.

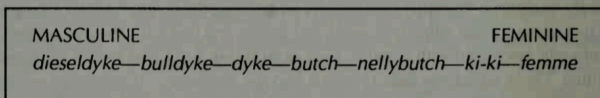


Diagram 2. The Lesbian continuum of the 1950s and '60s.

Diagram 2 uses some of the behavioral labels used among Lesbians of my acquaintance during the 1950s and '60s to illustrate how we expressed our perceptions of the continuum, and many of these terms are still in use among Lesbians today. We constructed a semantics in order to “make sense” of ourselves in HS terms, which ignored our existence. Since it was our denial of the entailment relation between the BIOLOGICAL and FUNCTIONAL levels of HS that defined us as “Lesbians,” we accepted as given the validity of sex-specific behaviors as defined by HS and tried to “fit” ourselves in somewhere. Diagram 2 represents one attempt to construct a coherent, intelligible semantic system for describing perceived differences among Lesbians. Although we recognized a range of behaviors

and the purported distinctions were fuzzy (to say the least), we were still bound by the basic dichotomy of HS as an explanation of personality. We used the most general terms, *butch* and *femme*, as though they were meaningful to us. We used them to talk about ourselves, to convey information about ourselves that seemed significant in our social context.

Ignored, however, in previous and current discussions of roles among Lesbians is the "ki-ki." She, along with her label, has disappeared, because our most recent dialogues have focused on the extremes as though one were necessarily either/or. This isn't accurate historically, and it's unfair to ourselves in the present.⁷ I point this out because the term is obsolete as nearly as I can tell. When the Feminist second wave hit the Lesbian shore, *ki-ki* disappeared because it ceased, temporarily, to be "meaningful" among those Lesbians who became Feminists. (Maybe it's still used among nonFeminist Lesbians.) The Feminist analysis of heterosexual roles, male oppression, and sexism were adopted by Lesbian-Feminists and applied to the roles of butch and femme, and "sex-roles" among Lesbians became "politically incorrect." As Joan Nestle pointed out,⁸ we lost a large part of our past, identities, and our tradition, such as it was. Being proud and honest about our past, however, doesn't mean its assumptions are or should be viable in the present.

I include the term *ki-ki* here because it named Lesbians who considered themselves neither "butch" nor "femme." The "role" they adopted depended upon who they were being sexual with at the time. In so doing, they affirmed the validity of the roles for those who chose them, but refused to make such a choice themselves. They didn't want to be "limited," and some of them regarded those Lesbians who were "into roles" as having made a bad choice.

One could be "ki-ki" in the "old days" (scarcely twenty years ago), when *dyke* and *bulldyke* (*bulldagger* among blacks) were strictly derogatory in their usage, within and without the Lesbian sub-culture. The more blatantly "mannish" a Lesbian was in her looks, dress, and behavior, the more negatively charged the label applied to her, by heterosexuals and Lesbians. Calling oneself a "butch" might correlate with one's physical appearance, including dress, but not necessarily. I knew a lot of "butches" who looked and were very "feminine," and we called them "nelly butches." "Butch" labeled their sexual behavior, not their appearance. One self-labeled butch I knew was extremely feminine. Not only could she pass as het, she was, in fact, a call girl, and the mistress of a wealthy man.

Also significantly absent from current discussions is another kind of Lesbian I remember well from the 1950s and 1960s: the Lesbian who didn't label herself at all. There were Lesbians, even then, who did not call themselves *butch* or *femme* or *ki-ki*. They disapproved of the roles altogether. Furthermore, they looked down on those of us who did role-play, and they said so to our faces. They may have even been a majority of the Lesbian sub-culture back then, or maybe it was 50-50, or maybe role-playing Lesbians were a majority. I can't quantify that from my

remembrances. (Maybe it depended on the bars where one hung out, or whether or not one went to bars. I did know a few Lesbians who frequented the bars I did who refused to conform to the role stereotypes.)

In the late '60s, along came a female-centered political analysis (at least it claimed to be female-centered): role-playing among Lesbians was "out," and abandoning role-identified behaviors was "in." But—I know, you know, we most of us know—there is still a large, very large, Lesbian population who rejected Feminism and its analysis from the beginning of its influence among other Lesbians. They said, essentially, "We're happy the way we are; we have no intention of changing; we don't want to change, and you (meaning Lesbian-Feminists) aren't going to make us. Period." This "dialogue" in the Lesbian "community" was and is still being carried on by only a handful of us. Vast numbers are silent either because they don't know it's happening or don't care.

With the development of Lesbian self-consciousness about the political meaning of our lives, the reclamation of previously derogatory words began, *Dyke* among them, because it was so negatively charged for us. That this process *seemed* to move toward the "masculine" end of the continuum is a result of the HP version of reality, not anything inherent in being a Dyke. Given the HS dichotomy, "reclaiming" femininity is irrelevant because it's essential to HP. If Lesbians want to deny the "naturalness" of HP categories, and assert the positive value of our deviance, adopting femininity doesn't make any sense. To date, our efforts to use the word *Dyke* in positive ways, often equating the word with "high political-consciousness," have yet to be taken up by a majority of Lesbians. Other Lesbians say they're "reclaiming" femme and butch roles for themselves; *ki-ki*, as I've said, became obsolete. We haven't yet tried to reclaim *bulldagger* and *bulldyke*. Maybe there're good reasons for this even though we haven't articulated them.

What is the Locus of Lesbian Identity?

How is it that Lesbians, in spite of good intentions, continue to write and read in utterly opposed contexts? Why, for example, was Jan Brown revealing the misogyny she felt when she was a butch (in *Out/Look* 7:30-34), while Sabrina Sojourner was "reclaiming" femininity (in *Sojourner*, Feb., 1991)? Up to this point, I've left unmentioned two important factors: Political Consciousness and the continuum, Overt. . . Covert. I think it's because Lesbians conceive of ourselves in relation to the heteropatriarchy in conflicting ways, depending on whether or not we're Feminists and, more specifically, the brand of Feminism we've incorporated into our value system. I will call this "political consciousness."

Some Lesbians (I would say most) live *within* the heteropatriarchy, and would not even name this society as such; they think of themselves as being not so very different from heterosexuals, and so have only rudimentary analysis to account for their discomforts. Others conceive of ourselves as being *outside* the

boundaries of the heteropatriarchy, as being quite different from heterosexuals, and so mistrust any aspect of our thinking and behavior that apes or mirrors the heteropatriarchal world. Lesbians don't share a "consensus reality"; that is, we have, as yet, no agreed-upon framework within which we make our decisions and evaluate options. We have no self-created description of what it "means" to be a Lesbian in HP, with the result that our valuations of specific kinds of behavior are diverse. Our willingness to challenge HP descriptions varies in terms of where we conceive of ourselves, as Lesbians, with respect to HP society. No Lesbian can ignore HP or pretend that it isn't there, although many try; none of us can deny its influence in our lives or in the ways we think. To ignore HP or claim that somehow we've "gotten past" it in our thinking is to trivialize the damage HP has done to us as Lesbians. These self-conceptions are in conflict each with the other, and they cannot be reconciled. There's no "middle ground" in this disagreement on which we can compromise, even if we were willing.

For the sake of argument, think of HP society as a circle. At various stages in her development and awareness, a Lesbian positions herself with respect to HP on the basis of her understanding of the meaning of her Lesbian life. Diagram 3 represents six possible Lesbian stances in her acknowledgment of HP: Conservative, Conventional, Humanist, Feminist, Radical Feminist, and Separatist. Each point on this continuum represents an approximate, not an absolute, political position. (I've used this terminology because I think it'll be understood by my readers.)

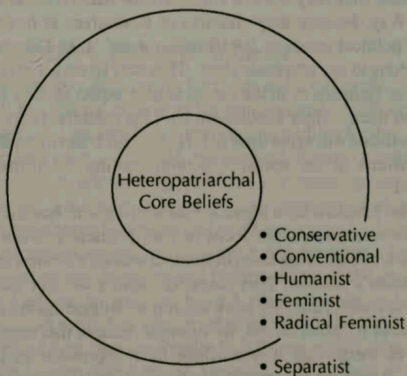


Diagram 3. Lesbian Self-consciousness as Political Identification

Conservative Lesbians accept HP descriptions of reality as accurate and all-encompassing, and they live as though the givens of HP were unalterable fact. Such Lesbians are usually white, financially comfortable, and living in the suburbs of large cities. In terms of the way they think, they are virtually indistinguishable from their heterosexual neighbors; they don't think of themselves as "Lesbian," and most of their friends may be heterosexuals. In spite of the fact that many Conservative Lesbians have never lived as heterosexuals, and must have, at some point in their lives, rejected the essential HP assumption, this fact has no political significance for them. They're "never-het," but covert. They believe that the "world" is fine just as it is. For them, no social or personal change is necessary or desirable.

Conventional Lesbians differ from the Conservatives only in that they may call themselves "gay" or "Lesbian," their circle of friends may consist of like-minded Lesbians and gaymen in addition to heterosexuals, and some—those who can afford it—may contribute money to "gay" causes as a substitute for active involvement. They may be never-het or ex-het, but their Lesbianism, or "gayness," is covert.

Humanist Lesbians believe that "we're all human beings," and that living as a Lesbian is no different from living as a heterosexual, even though they are aware that HP is oppressive in many ways. The oppressiveness of HP they interpret as some kind of misunderstanding, as though Lesbian oppression will end when heterosexuals understand that Lesbians are "just like" them. The political awareness of Humanist Lesbians may extend to pro-consumer, anti-war, anti-nuclear struggles; they are committed to saving the rainforest, the dolphins, pandas, and all living creatures; they may work as volunteers for AIDS crisis lines or on behalf of the United Way, because they conceive of themselves as having a stake in the outcome of political issues as HP identifies them. Like Conventional Lesbians, they may belong to any economic class. They may be ex-het or never-het, and they may be out as Lesbians or in the closet; neither aspect of their lives is politically significant to them. Their Lesbianism isn't the essential factor of their identity. Humanist Lesbians will agree that HP is flawed, but believe that all we need to do is make alterations in the social structure, leaving the primary assumptions unchallenged.

Feminist Lesbians have identified themselves with women's oppression, and they make women's issues the focus of their political activism. They may, for example, work on rape crisis lines, in battered women's shelters or abortion clinics, or teach women's studies. They correctly identify the fact that women are oppressed in this society, and they work actively to struggle against that oppression as they understand it. Most do not, for example, believe that men are the enemy—only some of them—and they attribute their oppression as Lesbians to their femaleness. They are committed to changing the structure of HP to varying degrees; they question some of the essential values and categories of HP; but heterosexuality remains, for them, an unchallenged given. Lesbian-Feminist con-

sciousness is possible for the ex-het or never-het, closeted or out.

Lesbians who call themselves Radical Feminists position themselves somewhere between Feminist and Separatist Lesbians, on the limits of reality as HP describes it. On the one hand, they identify their oppression as primarily women's oppression, not specifically Lesbian oppression; on the other they believe that men are the enemies of all women and have developed some of the best analyses of how HP society perpetuates itself and have proposed various methods of destroying "patriarchy." Although they don't identify as Lesbians first, they understand the threat that Lesbians pose to HP. They stop just short of identifying "patriarchy" as *heteropatriarchy*.

Separatist Lesbians think of ourselves as living *outside* HP society (although this is seldom true). Accepting the HP description of Lesbians as outcasts, we have chosen to stand in an antagonistic position to the HP, and it's Separatists who identify ourselves as Lesbians first and last. Whether never-het or ex-het, Separatists put our Lesbian selves first politically. The essential ingredient of Separatist politics is a rejection of everything vital to the structure of HP, which requires that all assumptions be challenged and examined. Whereas Humanist or Feminist Lesbians believe that behaviors and attitudes can be justified by appealing to the way they feel, Separatists (and Radical Feminists) want to know where these "feelings" originate. We're not interested in stopping our analysis with *how* we feel, because appealing to feelings is one way of resisting change. If we're going to change ourselves and unlearn HP's version of reality, then we're committed to examining our feelings and finding out *why* we have them and where they originate in our experience.

Toward a Lesbian-Centered Semantics

Because Lesbians have different backgrounds and experiences, communication among us will be difficult as long as we use the same words with different meanings and values. But we should not stop arguing with each other. While our debates and discussions continue, though, we need other ways of talking to each other or, at least, explicit acknowledgments that our meanings may be vastly different. We haven't yet begun to work out our problems with the English language. As the debates about femininity and its effects among Lesbians illustrate, we don't have a "consensus reality," and any attempt to construct a Lesbian ethic are often met with arguments based on and fashioned out of HP descriptions of reality. Why are Lesbians so quick to resist Lesbian analysis and defend HP categories? Why do so many Lesbians resist what they derisively call "Lesbian conformity" yet defend their own conformity to HP categories? Where does this reversal originate and whom does it serve? Lesbians? I don't think so.

For Lesbians who are trying to live outside of or on the boundaries of HP, our attitudes toward and the values we attach to those behaviors have undergone important changes, but the diversity of behaviors observable among Lesbians hasn't. How are we to manage communication among us in spite of our disagreements? I've identified four options (there are probably others):

- 1) We can accept the valuation assigned to the MASCULINE/FEMININE dichotomy by HP, as some Lesbians do, and continue to invest our lives with what those words mean;
- 2) We can reverse the valuation made by HP, as do those Lesbians who maintain they can "reclaim" femininity as "positive";
- 3) We can muddle along as we do now, sometimes assigning positive value to "masculine" behaviors, sometimes to feminine behaviors, and sometimes agreeing;
- 4) We can reject HP semantics altogether, move further outside the boundaries and terms of HS, and start anew to construct a semantic system of our own.

The first three options are already operational among Lesbians. Whether one values either masculine or feminine behaviors and looks, or neither, positively depends, I think, on where she places herself along the continuum of Diagram 3. This "makes sense," if one accepts the logic. Many Lesbians have constructed an identity dependent on the terms created and validated by HS; they have an investment in that identity, and any analysis which challenges that identity is suspect.

If my analysis of Heteropatriarchal Semantics is accurate, and if my analysis of how we have revised that framework in order to "make sense" of ourselves is accurate, then emotional health—thinking well of and feeling good about ourselves—requires us—those like me, who wish to change—to act on option 4: *creating a new semantic system for talking about who we are*. This is the hardest option of the four. It means we have to think differently about who we are as Lesbians in a world that hates us. (With good reason: a Lesbian who loves herself exposes the arbitrariness of HP consensus reality. If we're real, then their conceptual framework is flawed, partial at best.)

For starters, I'd suggest that we toss out HP semantics, including *masculine* and the labels derived from HS, *butch* and *femme*. Easy to say, hard to do. I don't believe we can ignore the label *feminine*, because so many Lesbians claim that "femininity" is an inherent trait of their "womanhood" and that femininity is a viable Lesbian mode. They still have an investment in HP descriptions of reality. Ideally, in some world that doesn't yet exist, it should be OK for a Lesbian to don a

dress or blue jeans, high heels or boots, decorate herself or not, wear her hair long or short, cut her nails or grow them long; but it's not. Those aspects of behavior and appearance labeled "femininity" in HP are dangerous for us. We still live in a heteropatriarchy and Lesbians who incorporate male ideas of appropriate female behaviors into their lives signal their acceptance of the HP version of reality. What is more, they will continue to accept preferential treatment at the expense of Lesbians who defy HP authority in order to hold onto our identity.

Lesbians are a sub-culture trying to hold our own within the context of a large, hostile, HP society. Whatever we "choose" to wear, however we choose to look, those choices are likely to be interpreted within the HP semantic system by anyone who doesn't know us. Somehow, we have to acknowledge the existence of HP categories and their influence in order to unlearn them, without letting that acknowledgment become validation and acceptance of those categories as "true."

I believe that Lesbian femininity is politically corrupt and degrading, because Lesbians perceived as "mannish"—and described as "acting like men"—are shunted aside, marginalized, and trashed by Lesbians who value femininity.

How can we talk about the significant differences among us, the actual range of our observable behaviors, without accepting the assumptions of HP? In the past, the labels *butch*, *femme*, and *ki-ki* served Lesbians as a way of acknowledging and talking about behavioral differences among us, and they still serve that purpose in some segments of the Lesbian sub-culture. But those of us who want to reconceive ourselves in terms that don't carry with them the assumptions of HS will have to learn to describe ourselves in specific, sometimes lengthy ways that avoid both HS and its values.

In order to do this, we'll need to start with a radically different description of the "world," one based on Lesbian experiences and perceptions. Since Lesbians haven't yet worked out a "consensus reality," let's understand first of all that this dialogue is taking place only among Lesbians who are active politically. Let's find ways to talk to each other in a *Lesbian context*. (This will enable us to ignore, for example, those conservative, never-het Lesbians who are as Lesbian-hating and misogynist as the heterosexuals whose company they prefer to ours.)

We can make a significant start, as Linda Strega suggested, by valuing Lesbians who rejected and reject efforts to feminize them. We can value our deviance from HP reality, refuse to value Lesbian femininity positively—because it represents conformity to HP descriptions and values—and value nonfeminized Lesbians positively. Some of us resist HP training, to varying degrees; others do not, and to varying degrees. HP rewards those who conform to its version of reality; let's stop privileging HP conformity and, instead, reward Lesbian resisters. Strega posited that Lesbians must learn to value positively our resistance to HP programming and stop rewarding Lesbians who conform to it.

Most importantly, we must stand our ground outside of HP reality, occupy it with determination, and resist efforts to assimilate us and dilute the radical force of

our perceptions. Lesbians who "pass" as heterosexuals do so because they don't want to live openly as Lesbians. Their choice clearly indicates that they value HP approval *more* than they value their Lesbian identity. A corollary of this is their avoidance and marginalization of Lesbians who cannot or will not pass. And I am weary of being exhorted in the Lesbian and Feminist media to value feminized Lesbians. While I recognize that many Lesbians try to pass in order to survive in HP, recognition of that fact doesn't mean any of us should value that deception positively or persist in according them preferential status in our communities. The fact of the matter is that Lesbians who pass do so in order to survive better, in economic terms, than those who don't.

Lesbians who can pass as heterosexuals must understand and admit that they acquire specific social privileges because they can hide their Lesbianism. The privileges and rewards of femininity, in addition to money and social approval, are a false sense of worth and self-esteem because they are grounded in hypocrisy and pretense. Furthermore, Lesbians who prize femininity either believe they are superior to "obvious" Lesbians or they sexualize the difference. In a Lesbian context, FEMININITY = HETEROSEXUALITY = CLOSETED = PRIVILEGE = LESBIAN-HATING. If Lesbians who pass as heterosexuals expect Dykes to condone their choices, as they seem to, they must also recognize that mutual respect is a two-way street. Describing nonfeminized Lesbians as "mannish" or accusing us of "acting like a man" is ignorant, degrading, and insulting. Dykes are accustomed to hearing such descriptions from heterosexuals; we don't expect or want to hear it from other Lesbians. It discounts our existence and disowns us. The fact of the matter is that *we* understand the fears and doubts of passing Lesbians, yet they've made little or no effort to understand us. Femininity in a Lesbian gives her access to heterosexual privileges, privileges that are tangible: they get better jobs that bring with them social prestige and money. Dykes know all about femininity, what it is, what it means, and the rewards it offers. Because femininity in women is so highly prized by men, femininity cannot be positively valued in a Lesbian context.

Endnotes

1. None of what I say here should be interpreted as referring retrospectively to the Lesbian femmes of the decades before the Women's Liberation Movement.

2. For example, one of the important differences among Lesbians, and one that most seem to want to ignore, is that between those of us who have always been Lesbians and those who lived and behaved as heterosexuals for long periods of their lives. That single difference—choosing to act on and live our desires, or choosing to live with/marry a man and bear children—has profound ramifications for how we behave and understand ourselves as Lesbians. For one thing, that choice frequently results in a class difference: lifelong Lesbians do not have the upward class mobility of passing, ex-het Lesbians, and remain poor and working-class because we can't get jobs that pay well.

3. I cannot do justice in this brief summary to Linda Strega's analysis in "The Big Sell-Out," nor to the responses to Strega from Paula Mariedaughter and Mary Crane, and I urge readers to seek out the issues of *Lesbian Ethics* in which the three pieces were published. Strega in particular provides specific examples of the HP attitudes she's in the process of unlearning with an analysis of why she wants to unlearn them.

4. Consider, for example, Maxine Feldman, who isn't feminine, who has never tried to pass as heterosexual, who isn't "pretty" in HP terms, in contrast to the recording "stars" of Olivia Records, who persist in trying to break into the "mainstream" of the music business. They purposely try to pass as heterosexuals, to look like heterosexuals. In fact, most of them refuse to use the L-word from the stage, even at events where they know that a majority of the audience is Lesbian. Such musicians not only betray those of us who are out-front as Lesbians, they exploit our desire for a music of our own in a cynical way, using our money and loyalty to them as a means to the financial gains they hope to acquire by appealing to a "broader" audience (i.e., heterosexuals). There is a cruel irony in this: with the exception of, perhaps, Holly Near (if one still thinks she deserves to call herself a "Lesbian"), none of them have succeeded in breaking into the mainstream.

5. A second edition of that dictionary appeared in 1987, but the definitions of these words remained virtually the same.

6. See, for example, the Sept./Oct., 1985, issue of *Lesbian Connection*, in which a couple of women maintain that they are "Lesbians" in spite of the fact that they fuck men! As one of them puts it: "I have broadened my definition of what a Lesbian is." Her use of the word *broadening* is, of course, intended to make readers interpret the statement as positive by opposing it to the word *narrow*, which has negative connotations in HS (unless it's used to characterize one's waistline or hips!). This kind of "broadening" is pernicious, hypocritical, and self-serving—and, besides, simply not possible. Like it or not, a Lesbian has sex with wimmin, not men; heterosexual and bisexual females have sex with men. That's what the words mean. I have no desire to "reclaim" heterosexuality as a lifestyle, and wimmin who do can't call themselves Lesbians. I have a personal investment in that word and I won't have it ripped off or diluted by those whose actions dilute its significance. Another word for *broadening* is *sell-out*.

7. With the notable exception of Merril Mushroom in *Common Lives/Lesbian Lives* 9 (Fall, 1983), 39-45.

8. In her article, "Butch-Fem Relationships: Sexual Courage in the 1950's," *Heresies: The Sex Issue* 12, 3: 21-24.